

The Historical Context of the New Testament

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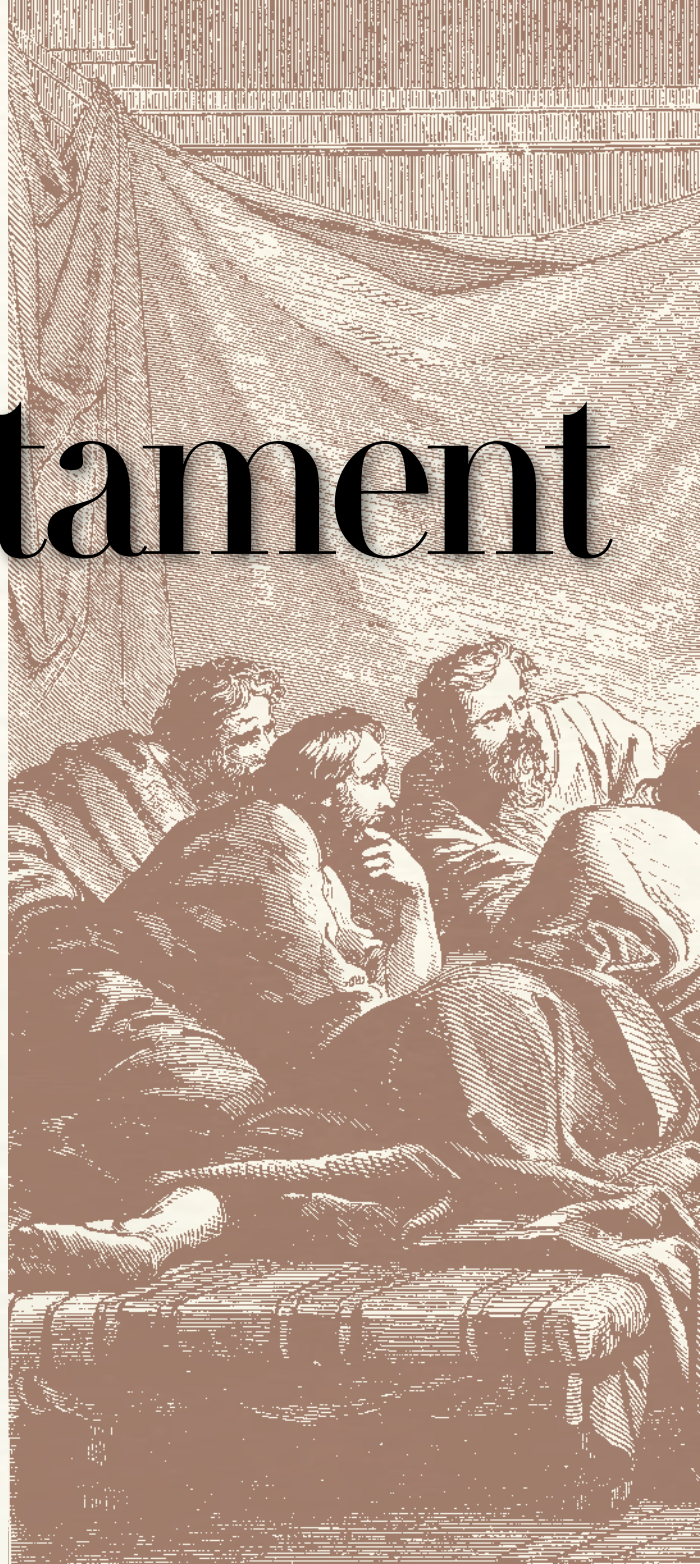
Each volume of sacred scripture has its own unique history and bears testimony to the gospel of salvation in its own distinct way. The New Testament has the distinction of being the volume of scripture that preserves the words of individuals who knew Jesus personally or who followed Him shortly after His Resurrection—making the New Testament an invaluable resource to help us come closer to the Savior and gain a glimpse of His mortal ministry. An understanding of the history of the New Testament, how it has been passed down to us, and who wrote it can increase our appreciation of this remarkable book of scripture and in turn give us greater spiritual strength as we, like the early followers of Jesus Christ, face our own trials.

What Is the New Testament?

In the years shortly after Jesus died, the term “New Testament”

would not have referred to a collection of books about the Lord’s life and death but more precisely to something He said to His disciples on the night of the Last Supper: “This is my blood of the *new testament*, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28; emphasis added). The Greek words translated as “new testament” actually refer to a covenant, the new covenant the Savior extends to us through the Atonement. The writings recorded in the Bible and referred to as the New Testament describe, document, and teach about that new covenant between the Lord and His people.

The writings preserved in the New Testament focus upon different aspects of the Savior’s ministry. The New Testament begins with the Gospels, a term that means the “good news,” referring to the life, ministry, and divine role of Jesus Christ. The New Testament also contains a



Understanding the origins of this remarkable book of scripture can inspire our study.



Jesus Christ and His Apostles at the Last Supper.

history of the first missionary efforts of the Church (the book of Acts); letters from early leaders, such as Peter and Paul, that admonish the early Christians (who were also called Saints) to remain true to the faith; a

testimony (Hebrews); and an apocalypse (Revelation) that promises the return of the Lord in the latter days. Each of the writers has a different perspective to offer, and each wrote with a specific audience in mind rather

than attempting to fill in perceived gaps in the historical record. In the middle of the fourth century A.D., the 27 books that record the new covenant of the Lord were gathered together and ordered as they appear today.



The early Saints hearing one of Paul's epistles.

How Was the New Testament Passed Down to Us?

From the larger group of disciples, Jesus called 12 men as Apostles. Those men followed Him throughout His ministry, suffered with Him, and also enjoyed triumphs and Spirit-filled experiences. After Jesus died, the Apostles, along with other faithful followers, began to record their experiences. Two events may have triggered their desire to preserve their records about the life of Jesus: first, Jerusalem and the temple fell to a Roman army in A.D. 70. Second, the forces of

apostasy were already at work (see Acts 20:29–30). Therefore, many of the writings in the New Testament were recorded to help the faithful see their way through the calamity and controversy of their day.

Looking back on their experiences, we can learn how they faced troubling times and how the good news of the gospel became a steadying power in the struggle against the forces of apostasy.

Toward the end of the first century,

all of the writings now preserved in the New Testament were completed and circulated widely among the branches of the Church. Scribes made copies of the texts on papyrus and then later on parchment,

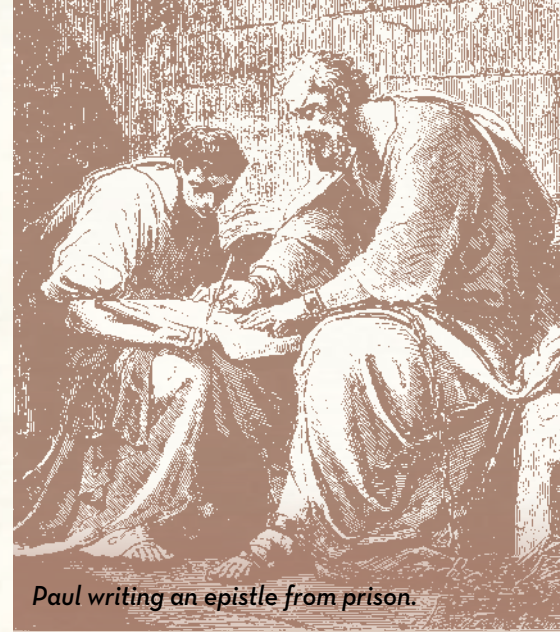
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but there were relatively few copies available. Church members gathered the books that were available to them and read and studied the words of the Lord and the Apostles. One notable setback to the circulation of the scriptures was the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Diocletian in A.D. 303. He ordered that the Christian scriptures be burned and forced Christians to offer sacrifices to pagan gods. Many faithful individuals hid the sacred texts during those years of persecution. Later, when the first Christian emperor, Constantine, ordered new copies of the scriptures to be made, his scholars were able to recover books that had been used in the branches prior to Diocletian's edict. Our modern printed editions of the New Testament trace their ancestry to the copies of the Bible made during Constantine's day and therefore back to those individuals who sacrificed their safety to preserve the new covenant of the Lord.

Not long after Constantine had directed the New Testament to be copied and circulated anew, the books that compose our current Bible came to be organized in their present order. This order follows a pattern set by the Old Testament. The New Testament contains the Law (the Gospels), the history of Christianity (Acts), and the Prophets (Romans through Revelation). Both the Old and New Testaments end with a promise of the Lord's return (Malachi and Revelation). The placement of these prophetic works also emphasizes a forward-looking hope of salvation and future revelation.

Who Wrote the New Testament?

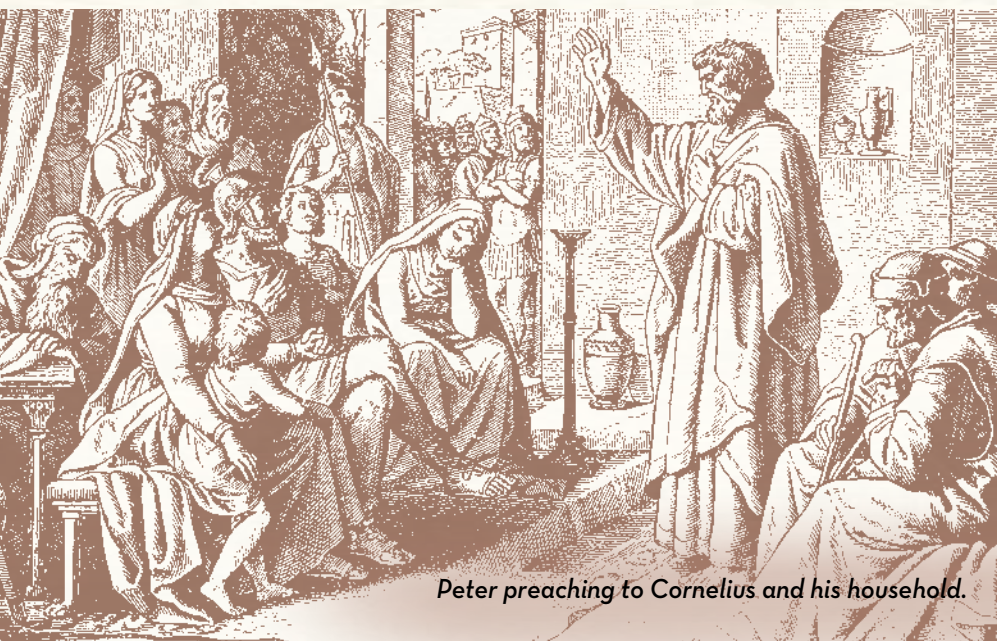
Each author of the New Testament wrote with a distinct perspective on the saving mission of Jesus Christ. Two of the Gospels were written by Apostles: Matthew and John. These apostolic witnesses provide an eyewitness testimony to the life of Jesus. Two later followers of the Lord also



Paul writing an epistle from prison.

wrote Gospels: Mark and Luke, who testified to what they had felt and heard. Both of these men were at one time companions of Paul (see Acts 12:25; 2 Timothy 4:11) and reflect in part the interests of the growing number of Saints who lived outside of Judea and who had never known the Lord in His lifetime. Instead, their accounts provide a vivid testimony of Him in whom they believed.

Paul's letters are likely the earliest writings in the New Testament, although they were not all written at the same time. His testimony was borne of experience as a missionary, from several powerful visions (see Acts 9:1-6; 2 Corinthians 12:1-7), and through personal association with Peter and others (see Galatians 1:18-19). He wrote largely to settle disputes within the branches, but at other times he wrote to his personal friends (Timothy and Titus). In one letter Paul asks that a slave owner accept the return of a runaway slave whom Paul had met while they were in prison (Philemon). Traditionally, the book of Hebrews is ascribed to Paul, although the usual introduction wherein he identifies himself as the



Peter preaching to Cornelius and his household.



Peter and John preaching and healing.

author is not present. Regardless, the book testifies of how we can boldly come to the Lord through faith. Included in the New Testament after Paul's letters, Hebrews is a treatise on having faith in the face of adversity.

The short Epistle of James was also written quite early and contains references to Jesus's teachings from the Sermon on the Mount that were transmitted orally and separately from the written Gospel of Matthew (see James 1:13; 4:12; 5:12). James, the Lord's younger brother, is the probable author of this epistle. He was privileged to know and see the resurrected Savior (see 1 Corinthians 15:7) and played an important role in many events in the Church's history (see Acts 15:13–29).

The New Testament also contains two letters by the Apostle Peter and three by the Apostle John. Both urged Christians to be faithful; Peter in particular was concerned about fidelity during times of trial.

Jude is one of the latest books written in the New Testament. Like James, this book was also probably written by

one of the Lord's brothers ("Juda" in Mark 6:3). Jude wrote in an attempt to quell growing apostasy in the branches.

Finally, the New Testament ends with the revelation to the Apostle John, who recorded a vision of the Lord's return in glory to usher in His millennial reign. That vision describes in vivid detail the struggle between good and evil. Most of the chapters deal with events that were in the future



EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

"I love the New Testament's apostolic travels and miracles and the letters of Paul. Most of all, I love its eyewitness accounts of the words and the example and the Atonement of our Savior Jesus Christ. I love the perspective and peace that come from reading the Bible."

Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "The Miracle of the Holy Bible," *Liahona* and *Ensign*, May 2007, 81.

for John, including events in the latter days—our day.

For Whom Was the New Testament Written?

Because the New Testament is properly a new covenant between the Lord and those who have faith in Him, the books are intended for all those who seek to know Him, whether in this dispensation or in previous dispensations. Originally, the authors of the New Testament wrote texts that could be of immediate use in the branches of the Church in their day, with an understanding that they were recording the most important events in the history of humankind. John, for example, viewed his writings as a testimony: "These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31). Others, such as Luke, wrote with the intent to document the history:

"Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a

CHILDREN

Where Is It in the Scriptures?

Listed below are eight stories from the scriptures. Find which book of scripture each story comes from. If you're not sure, look up the subject of the story in the index, Topical Guide, or Guide to the Scriptures.

- Nephi breaks his hunting bow. (1)
- Noah builds the ark. (2)
- The Word of Wisdom is given. (3)
- Esther saves her people. (4)
- The prodigal son returns home. (5)
- Captain Moroni makes the title of liberty. (6)
- Jesus teaches the Sermon on the Mount. (7)
- The Kirtland Temple is dedicated. (8)

Now find the numbers in the puzzle that match the number in parentheses. Color those spaces the color listed below for that book of scripture.

Old Testament=blue

Book of Mormon=yellow

New Testament=red

Doctrine and Covenants=brown

declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us,

“Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word;

“It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order” (Luke 1:1–3).

Early Christians were diverse, some coming from Jewish families, while others had been raised in Gentile homes, while still others likely had very little formal religion in their lives prior to being baptized. They were, in effect, a mirror of today's diverse group of Saints. Therefore, their struggles can reveal to us powerful lessons on how to overcome wickedness and remain faithful despite trial and temptation. They also show us how the branches struggled when they were very small and how there was safety in the words of the apostles and prophets.

A Testimony for Today

The New Testament reveals that during uncertain times, when some would not hearken to the call of the gospel, there was safety for those who “continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Other examples teach us how even the righteous are tried (see 1 Corinthians 10:13) and how the heart of the gospel message is as simple today as it was 2,000 years ago: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). Like the Doctrine and Covenants, in which the Prophet Joseph Smith bore the testimony “that he lives!” (D&C 76:22), the New Testament bears a similar testimony that the tomb was empty on Easter morning: “He is not here: for he is risen” (Matthew 28:6). ■

